NETWORKING: SOCIAL WORKERS' RESPONSE AND INVOLVEMENT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Social Science with Honours (B.Soc.Sc.) (Hons) Social Work Programme

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In loving memory of my aunty

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

During a tutorial, we students were separated into small groups and asked to discuss about the causes and solutions to the problem of “budaya bohia”. Popular answers given by my classmates, as usual in previous discussions on other social problems, included “lack of religious teaching”, “negative influence of the mass media”, “distorted education system”, etc. as causes of problem; and “more religious teaching”, “control of mass media”, “change in the education system”, etc. as solutions to problem. I never disagreed with these answers, but I wondered ABOUT their relevance for a discussion in a social work class. Strictly speaking, religions, mass media, education, etc. are not specialised fields for social workers. Instead they are fields for religious teachers, communicators, educators, etc. Nevertheless, these factors are related to social problems. So I started to think: can we do something to bring together the religious teachers, communicators, educators, etc. and social workers in dealing with social problems? What is this something? Has it already existed or it can never exist? These questions had led me to the theme of this thesis— as I tentatively call this something as A NETWORK. I would like to thank the class for initiating this theme.

After the initiating stage, the idea of networking had been repeatedly discussed, examined and even tried out with other friends under the warm sun and cool starlight of P.J., K.L., Ipoh, and Kota Samarahan. They are my old classmates in SMJK Sam Tet, Poh Ching and Chee Kong; and present course mates in UNIMAS, Kok Meng and Khee Fatt. These friends are too close to say “thank you” to.

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ABSTRACT

Networking is a dynamic approach to deal with the increasingly complex issues of social problems of today. This study aims mainly to find out social workers' response and involvement in this relatively new approach, and also seek their suggestions on suitable models for networks. The population consists of all social workers in Kuching and Samarahan; among them 13 samples have been selected from various social work organizations. Their views have been collected by answering questionnaires and interviews which are based on five chosen types of network:- personal, neighbourhood, self-help, social workers and multidisciplinary. Data has been analysed through statistical software to compare respondents' scores on the questionnaires on both an individual and a collective basis. Qualitative analysis of supporting reasons and barriers proposed by respondents have also been recorded in detail. The findings show that social workers have a highly positive response to the idea of networking and their involvement in networking activities have been quite satisfactory. Both governmental and non-governmental social work organizations play equally important roles in creating networks. An umbrella organization and disciplines that network frequently with social workers have been identified. Most of the networks found are informal and unstructured. There are also suggestions on ways to enhance networking. Other related issues in social work have also been discussed. However, the search for suitable networking models and structures has not been successful.
ABSTRAK

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Non Governmental Organizations NGOs
Community Base Rehabilitation CBR
Public Assistance P.A.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Social problems are multi-dimensional. They are caused by various individual, family, community, societal, political, economical, cultural and other factors. The emergence of social problems results largely from human responses to social change and the difficulty of life in a modern society. For instance, new technology may reduce the industrial labour force and results in an unemployment problem. The phenomenon of abandoned baby may be related closely to breakdown of family institution, negative influence of mass media, immigration of foreign labour, just to name a few.

Unfortunately, most social work interventions are uni-dimensional. Traditional social workers tend to deal with clients on an individual, one-to-one basis, overseeing the system surrounding an individual, that is the family members, relatives, friends, neighbourhood and other social relationship. Thus they fail to see the underlying causes and solutions to clients’ problems in a broader and holistic perspective. They also miss the chance to utilise many potential resources that can be found within these systems.
Due to lack of co-operation in the field of social work, individual or groups often focus on a method of intervention for their clients which is most familiar to them. Meanwhile, other possible effective methods which are still within the framework of social work, may be ignored. In dealing with poverty, for example, the traditional social workers of the psycho-analyst school would scrutinise the psychological state of individual clients while radical social workers involve themselves actively in political movements to change the unequal class structure. Both traditional and radical supporters seldom complement but instead contradict with each other’s effort. In other words, there is a lack of co-operation among social workers. Some may say this is the inevitable result of the specialisation of social work. However, if specialisation is not accompanied by a good practice of cross-sectional communication and co-operation among various specialised groups, it may lead to the fragmentation of social work.

Meanwhile, in the broader context, social workers tend to deal with a problem by a solely “social work approach”, without seeking large-scale co-operation and assistance beyond their own field such as business, technology, education, mass-media, politics, religion, etc. For instance, a drug rehabilitation centre would spend all effort on rehabilitating their clients, but little can be done to change the wider social circumstances that are against their effort, such as the supply of drug and the non-acceptance of employers towards former drug addicts. This may be due to the pre-defined, restricted role and limited power of social workers. One way to overcome this is to enhance and utilise the link between social workers and influential members from other fields. Another factor of wider circumstance may be the different perspectives to look at a “problem”. This is often illustrated by developmental issues where government and non-government bodies usually take different stands. A development plan which affects a small group of minority people may be viewed by the affected people
and some NGOs as a “problem”, while the authorities and developers consider it as beneficial. Hence what is needed is a forum to bring together concerned people from various backgrounds so that the best possible trade-off can be achieved in controversial issues.

Furthermore, in the process of planning and implementing, there is a danger for social workers to leave out their clients and clients’ self help groups-- while various concerned groups are busily dealing with social problems, the opinion and participation of those directly affected by the problems might be ignored. For example, while the welfare departments, political leaders, school teachers were giving all sorts of views on the issues of abandoned babies, nobody seemed to bother about the views, opinions, problems, feelings, etc. of the unwed mothers and their family members. This is against the important principles of clients’ participation and bottom-up decision making in social work practice.

Hence it is evident that, within and beyond the field of social work, there is a lack of co-ordination and co-operation, in ideas and in actions. This may be addressed by a network. The network should consist various levels: individual, family, friends, neighbourhood, clients’ self-help groups, social workers and even people from various other fields. Such a network will bring together various groups within a system to deal with a problem hand-in-hand, allowing the problem to be tackled from various dimensions. The network also provides a medium for sharing useful information and ideas as well as a forum to achieve agreement about social problems. The network will also enhance co-ordination and co-operation among various specialisation’s within and beyond the field, hence empowering social workers themselves in the process. Consequently, there will be better chance to minimise or solve social problems.
1.2 Problem Statement

The idea of network is only a personal thought. This ambitious idea will be useless without the acceptance and support from those who really work in the field. It is necessary to seek the views of practising social workers towards this idea and see how far they involve in networking at present.

Besides, the network is still a vague, abstract and uncompleted idea. The idea needs to be open to the comments of experienced social workers and their suggestions on what ARE the suitable models for the networking, what are the principles to be followed, and how to implement them.

1.3 Objective

1.3.1 General Objective

To find out social workers' response and involvement in networking.

1.3.2 Specific Objectives

To find out how far social workers agree or disagree with the idea of networking of various types: personal, neighbourhood, self-help, social workers and multidisciplinary, and their reasons for such response.

To find out how far social workers have been involved these various types (same as above) of networking activities and factors that enhance or hamper their involvement.

To call for suggestions on possible models, structures, direction and principles for the network and how to enhance social workers' involvement.
1.4 Significance

The study has collected as many literature and studies as possible concerning network and tried to identify and combine the general themes from those diverse but inter-relating views so that the idea became clearer.

The feedback collected from professional social workers about the idea of network will be useful materials for considerations in creating a network model for implementation in future.

The survey process raised the awareness and attention of professional social workers towards the idea of network and might lead them to include this idea in their planning and daily practices.

The findings of the study serve as a check and reference for those organisations that engage in networking activities, and for others to evaluate the performance of the former.

1.5 Scope

As shown in the specific objectives, this study aims to seek the opinion of social workers on their response towards the idea of networking, the level of their involvement and their suggestions on networking. The combination of the three will be a scope too large for a thesis at this level. Thus, priority will be given to the first and second specific objective, while the rest will only be supplement for data collecting, analysing and discussion of findings. Probably, more detailed findings on the last specific objective will require separate research in the future.
As the respondents or social workers will be drawn from lists and directories of social welfare organisations, the scope of the study will be limited to the opinion of social workers working with particular organisations. In other words, it does not include views of other scholars, clients of social work or the general public. However, it does not mean that the scope of the study will be small. It is because the definition of social workers will be very loose as compared to the other stricter definition of professional social worker. The study will include trained or untrained “social workers” who work for organisations that have major focus on welfare, charity or social services, etc.

As a social work research, the findings will seek the opinions of social workers towards their level of multidisciplinary networking with other fields, (such as business, mass media, politics, technologies, education, etc.) However, the study will NOT seek, vice-versa, opinions of people from other fields towards their networking with social workers.

Geographically, the scope of the survey will be limited to social work organisations in Kuching and Samarahan, Thus its findings only apply to a local context, although foreign literature and comment may be included in the process of data collection.

1.6 Limitations

As there is no similar previous study found in the literature review, shortcomings and mistakes will be expected in the process of research. In such an exploratory survey, there may be A lack of theories, facts and figures to design the research and to support the findings. Moreover, networking is not a popular theme in social work literature. The researchers often have to make references to literature from other fields, such as management, development, economics, etc.
One major dilemma that the researcher has been faced with is between making my idea of networking clear to the respondents and ensuring the response from the survey is objective and unbiased. As described above, the network is such a new and rare idea, hence many social workers may be reluctant, feel shy, or consider themselves unqualified to comment on it. Thus some explanation about the idea is necessary before asking for their opinion. However if the explanation goes too far, it will influence their opinion. This will be against the good practice of preserving the quality of *naturalness*, that is, no effort on the part of the researcher to manipulate or control subject’s behaviour.

Another major difficulty that I encountered for this study is what is being described as a *tension between two objectives of science*, which is the separation between practical questions (applied research) and intellectual questions (pure research). (Dawson *et al*, 1991) On one hand, I am eager to know the opinion of social workers towards the idea of network and my own prejudice is in favour of positive response. While on the other hand I need to fulfil the responsibility of researcher to seek evidence derived from quantitative and objective data with careful control. Sometimes the desire to know objectively can be totally subverted by the single-minded concerns of seeking simple, painless, and quick solutions to such a complex problem.

In terms of the scope, the researcher was at first very ambitious to include the three specific objectives of the study as listed, and some other objectives beyond these three. Despite the broad nature of the survey, I still very much hoped to achieving the third objective, that is, to collect suggestions on models of network. After some consultation, advice and rethinking, I realised that it was a too demanding for a research novice in a given time frame. Thus I have reduced the scope to the three, which I hope is manageable for a single research endeavour.
The respondents of questionnaire and interview tend to come from the top level staff from an organisation. Thus ideas from other social workers on the grassroots level may not be represented. Thus, extra effort has been made to encourage responses from the grassroots level.

Due to time, transportation and financial constraint, the study was only carried out in certain areas in Kuching and Samarahan where many social work organisations are located in. Part of the generalisation of the findings may not reflect the reality of social work organisations based in other areas.

1.7 Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1:

*Social workers respond positively to the idea of networking.*

Hypothesis 2:

*Social workers have involved themselves in networking activities.*

Hypotheses 1 and 2 are derived respectively from the first and second specific objective of the study. There is no hypothesis for the third specific objective as only qualitative suggestions will be needed.
1.8 Definitions

1.8.1 Social workers

In Cowie (1992), a social worker is defined as a person who works in social services and social work is the profession of people who work in social services. Social services is defined as organised government services providing help and advice, e.g. in matters of health, housing, mental illness, child care, the law, etc. These general definitions have restricted social workers to the government servants and social work as government services.

If we look at definitions within the social work profession like Skidmore et al. (1991): Social work is defined as an art, a science, a profession that helps people to solve personal, group (especially family), and community problems and to attain satisfying personal, group and community relationships through social work practice, including casework, group work, community organisation, administration, and research. This definition is broader and provides a larger population for this study.

However, social workers can be defined strictly: to be called a social worker, one has to possess minimum requirement of training in social work. For example, the membership to be a certified social workers in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) requires a master’s degree in social work (MSW) and at least two years of experience in social work under qualified supervision. (Skidmore et al, 1991) This is one extreme to the definition of social workers-- if we were to apply it in this study, very few local ‘social workers’ can be included in the population. For the practicality of this study, the researcher has to take into
account the reality of the social work "profession" in Malaysia i.e. many local
people are practising some forms of "social work" without or with very little
training, yet they are still considered "social workers" by the public. Thus it will
be more practical to adopt a local, layman's definition to the term social worker to
include both trained and untrained ones.

1.8.2 Network

Network - Literally, it means *closely linked group of people, companies, etc.*

(Cowie, 1992) However, in this thesis it refers to *linked group of people*

*(social workers and non-social workers) to deal with social problems.*

It has to be stressed that these are just preliminary definitions and are widely
open for suggestion and alteration in terms of its nature, scope, structure, closeness,
component, etc. This is due to the exploratory characteristic of this study, where the
whole idea of *network* will not be determined until the research has been carried out
and data analysed.

The above argument applies also to the terminology. There are still
possibilities that these terms will be dropped and changed later, as what has been done
so far. For example, before the term *network* was determined, other words such as *co-
operation and co-ordination* were used, but they were dropped because they were too
long and have restricted meanings. And for the types of the network, at first there was
only two types of network to be included:- early terms used were *intra* and *inter*
(which are grammatically inappropriate), then replaced by *micro* and *macro* (which
have other meanings and not common), and then *internal* and *external* networks. Then
when the types of network has been increased to five, these two terms have to be
changed again to *social workers' network* and *multidisciplinary network*. The priority
for selection of terms is given to the simpler and more common ones, so that they will be understood by those respondents with low level of education.

1.9 Assumptions

It is assumed that all respondent will understand the question and answer the questionnaire and interview questions honestly, seriously and precisely.

As the network may be a new concept to some of the respondents, it is assumed that they will refer to the interviewer for explanation of the meaning of the concept if they do not understand it.

However, at the same time, it is assumed that they will not base solely on interviewer’s explanation when they answer the questions, especially when considering whether or not to agree to the idea of network. Otherwise, the opinion of the respondents will be biased and subjective to the value and belief of the researcher.

It is also assumed that the data, especially the respondents’ stand on the idea of network, will not change significantly between the time of data collection and data analysis.

In terms of sampling, it is assumed that the samples will be representative of the total population of social workers in Kuching and Samarahan.
2.0 Fragmentation of social work

According to Bower (1993), fragmentation refers to the cluster into topical interest group, such as political and religious. Fragmentation in psychology is interpreted positively as inevitable consequence of increasing specialisation of knowledge as our science matures and range of application expands.

2.2 Definition of Network

Johnson (1992) defines networking as a form of co-ordination. It is the development and maintenance of communication and of ways of working together among persons of diverse interests and orientations. It is a technique that can facilitate macro level co-ordination. It is a means for persons from formal helping systems and those from informal systems (natural helpers) to work together.

Morales & Sheafor (1992) defines networking as the process of developing multiple interconnections and chain reactions among support systems According to Jansson (1994),
networking refers to the nature, number, and range of supportive relationships that people possess. Woodside & McClam (1994) define network in human service setting as a fabric of the system formed by the elaborate channels of communication among the agencies and the workers.

2.3 Importance of network

Brubaker (1981a as cited in Irons, 1989) points out that fragmentation has made it virtually impossible for the counselling profession to acquire widespread public visibility, legislative support and professional respect. This issue has been area of widespread concern for years and fully discussed in a special 1981 issue of Journal of Applied Rehabilitative Counselling (Vol. 12, No 2).

Authors of the world best-sellers Limits to Growth which evoked global attention towards environmental issues in the 70s, has recently written, in the sequel books Beyond the Limits, a few crucial steps for dealing with the environmental problems—one of them is by networking. “We could not do our work without networking.” The book suggests, “If you find a part of the sustainability revolution that interests you, you can find or form a network of others who share that interest. The network will help you discover where to go for information, what publications and tools are available, where to find administrative and financial support, and who can join you for specific tasks. The right network will not only help you learn but will allow you to pass your learning on to others.” (Meadows, et al., 1992:227-228)

Morales & Sheafor (1992) points out that networks have some prevention goals, which include:- to create community awareness of neighbourhood strengths and needs as perceived by the target population, to develop linkages among natural helpers in the
community, leaders and residents, to strengthen professional helping network by organising an advisory committee, to form linkages between the lay and professional networks and the macro system, to institutionalise the networking process, etc. Through such networking processes there will be community empowerment and an improvement in the quality of life.

Parsons et al (1994) points out that social problems are unlikely to be solved by any one discipline or institution. Social problem-based practitioners need to become proficient in inter-organisational networking. It will not be easy to achieve due to interagency competition and resulting territory issues, but its potential payoff is high. Networking is necessary ingredients in social actions. It is a capable force for both case and cause advocacy.

The importance of multidisciplinary co-operation is supported by Sparling & Aral, (1991) who says that the studying of control sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, can only work well with joint effort of various disciplines of professional work: health care givers (physicians and nurses), clinical microbiologists, molecular biologists, epidemiologists, psychologists and sociologists.

2.4 Existing Network

Example of micro networks in the United states are the American Psychology Association, the American Psychology Society, Federation of Behavioural, Psychological & Cognitive Sciences, etc. These umbrella organisations provide services including social bonding around mutual interests to promote scientific information exchange and to focus advancement in their positions in national forums.

Publications, international exchanges, job placement services, newsletter for a sense of community, set uniform standards for professional ethics, accreditation of training programmes, national conventions and forums, and platform which they can come together to
reaffirm their common interest and shared values. Unlike other smaller speciality groups, these national umbrella organisations help to aggregate and focus their advancement of policy issues that are under the consideration by Congress, administrators, regulatory agencies and federal, funding agencies, research grant, licensing of psychologists, reimbursement of psychology under health insurance plans. Interest can be best served collectively if they agree and pull together. (Bower, 1993)

Meadows et al. (1992) points out that there are networks of farmers who are exploring organic methods and sharing their experience. There are networks of environmental journalists, of “green” entrepreneurs”, of computer modelers, of game designers, land trusts, consumer co-operatives. Thousands and thousands of networks spring up naturally as people with common purposes find each other.

A shift from individual working to teamworking has been a marked trend in the development of social work. Initially developed in community handicapped teams. The concept has taken root with widespread acknowledgement that the shared resources of different discipline are required to deliver the most effective services to clients. (Bamford, 1990)

There is a discussion on “network therapy” by Hepworth (1993), in which the support network of relationship is tightened for the purpose of offering support, reassurance and solidarity to troubled members and other members of the social network. Mobilising social networks is considered in keeping with the best traditions of social work. However, systematic exploration of the use of social network concept is still in its infancy.
2.5 Model for Network

Meadows et al. (1992) stresses that informal networks are often more effective. They have small budgets. They are natural homes of new information. They are almost invisible but their effects are not negligible. A network is by definition non-hierarchical. It is a web of connections among equals. What holds it together is not force, obligation, material incentives, or social contract, but rather shared values and the understanding that some tasks can be accomplished together that could never be accomplished separately.

Areas or sectors that need to be included in the networks for non-profit agencies, according to Gronbjerg (1992), include: (1) political: Agencies may attempt to develop contacts with elected officials. One of the explicit purposes that it serve is to provide funding. (2) funder staff: This serves to forewarn agencies about impending changes in funding levels or program requirement. (3) with other non-profit organisations: It is for copying features, referral purposes and developing joint programs, etc.

According to Morales & Sheafor (1992), there are four levels of networking approaches: (1) personal networking, (2) networking for mutual aid and self-help, (3) human service organisation networking, and (4) networking within communities for community empowerment.